

Paresis: The Asylum Greeter and the Experienced Eye

In his report for 1866 Workman attributes six deaths to 'General Paresis'. He seems willing to allow that while it seems to be more common, that could be a function of more accurate diagnosis, partly due to the disease getting more attention. However, many general practitioners are still not aware of it.

The name, 'General Paralysis', is partly responsible for the failure to diagnose the condition. For one, at the onset of the disease, the patient is 'apparently free from any paralytic affection', or even characterized by an unusual degree of physical excitement: 'more active, lively, and robust' with 'more mental energy than ever in his life before'. Other characteristics of the disease, such as the patient's voracious appetite, and 'general apparent good health', appear to have nothing to do with paralysis.

The earliest symptom of the disease which appears to coincide with its designation is the 'defective articulation of speech' due to the 'impairment of the lateral muscles of the tongue' (14). This early manifestation is usually accompanied by delusions of wealth or some other incredible attribute. Workman declines to offer any details of the numerous cases at his disposal, partly from reluctance to pander to some readers' appetite for sensationalism, but mainly from reluctance to awaken others' horror at what might happen to themselves 'under the inscrutable decrees of Providence' (15). The lack of any real understanding of the origins of the disease must have made it seem all the more 'providential', and Workman's wards were already too full of people living in terror of providence for him to insensitively add to their fears.

In the nearly contemporary 'Notes Illustrative of the Pathology of Insanity',²³³ Workman approaches general paralysis indirectly, as an illustration of the difficulty of accounting for extreme mental phenomena with relatively minor physical changes. The enormity of such mental phenomena, as opposed to the triviality of the pathological phenomena associated with them, seems to refute any simple materialism: